

## Psychological Wellbeing of Social Work Students during COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

COVID 19 pandemic has affected the entire world adversely over the past four years, especially, the health and wellbeing of all the segments of the society. The pandemic has affected both the physical and mental health of the people in general and the students in particular. Mental health of the students has direct impact upon their learning outcome. Chief focus of sustainable development goal (SDG) 3 is promotion of good health and well-being. An empirical study has been carried out regarding the impact of the pandemic upon the psychological wellbeing of the students of social work at BPHEs' CSRD Institute of Social Work and Research, Ahmednagar, a reputed institution in Maharashtra. The perceived level of psychological wellbeing was measured by Ryff scales of psychological wellbeing. The study explored the level of psychological wellbeing of students of social work education with special reference to post graduate training in social work. It has been revealed that the level of psychological wellbeing of students of social work profession is not up to the expectation. Professional social workers belong to the frontline workers during any pandemic and their role and contribution to secure psychological wellbeing of the emotionally, economically and socially distressed people is significant. It is expected that the social workers maintain a high level of psychological wellbeing, so that, they would be able to help others to secure the same. Social work training must focus on strategies to secure high level of psychological wellbeing to all the student social workers.

**Keywords:** Mental health, Psychological well-being, Social work education, COVID 19 pandemic

### 1. Introduction

COVID 19 was the recent global challenge. All the countries in the world struggled hard to overcome this challenge. India was among the worst affected countries and occupied the second

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position in the list of the worst hit nations of the world (WHO, 2021). The USA is the worst affected one. Since the beginning of the year 2020, several studies have been undertaken to assess the impact of the global pandemic in all the parts of the world including India. Adverse impacts have been ascertained in all the walks of life, such as, education, economy, health and livelihood (Bahl, et. al., 2021). This paper presents one of such studies undertaken in the state of Maharashtra which reveals the pandemic impact upon the psychological wellbeing of students of social work education with special reference to post graduate students of social work education in Savitribai Phule Pune University.

The educational sector including pre-primary to higher educational levels have undergone dramatic changes during the pandemic. The teaching across the educational spectrum switched over to online mode resulting a huge digital push in the educational system. During this rapid and unexpected shift, digital divide that coincides with the rural-urban divide was visible. Many students were deprived of online educational avenues and resources for want of adequate internet facilities and suitable digital devices (UNICEF, 2020). Students as well as their parents underwent unprecedented stress and anxiety regarding their education and future career. Psychological wellbeing is one of the dimensions of life where the pandemic impact upon education is reflected. The study at hand explores various aspects of psychological wellbeing of students of social work education during the pandemic. This study has also implication on the third SDG 'promoting good health and wellbeing'.

The entire academic year 2020-21 is called the pandemic year. During this academic year, almost all the educational institutions in India conducted their educational programmes through various online platforms. Bhaskar Pandurang Hiwale

Education Society's Centre for Studies in Rural Development Institute of Social Work and Research (BPHEs' CSR D ISWR) is one of the pioneer social work Institutes in the state of Maharashtra that offers Masters in Social Work (MSW) affiliated to Savitribai Phule Pune University. Like any other institute, the BPHEs CSR D ISWR (hereafter, called the Institute) also shifted from offline to online mode of education. Stream Yard, Google Meet and Google Classroom were the online platforms adopted by the Institute to impart online education.

Research and field work trainings, being integral components of social work education, were found to be challenging tasks for the Institute to accomplish during the pandemic year. Field practice of social work includes working with individuals, groups, families and communities. Following the COVID protocol of maintaining physical distancing and travel restrictions made the field-based research and social work practice training all the more difficult. Following all these restrictions and constraints, the students ventured out to undertake their field work in their own respective villages or towns under the online supervision of the faculty supervisors. The chief focus of their field work was implementation of preventive measures and precautions concerning COVID 19 pandemic.

In order to give research training to the students, the Institute designed a national level research project on exploration and analysis of the socioeconomic impact of COVID 19 pandemic. The students collected data from their own locality during July to October, 2020 during their field work. Since the students of the Institute hail from across the country, data could be collected from different parts of the county. Each student analysed the data collected by them and prepared their own individual level research dissertation. By participating in this

research programme, the students could complete their research assignment. Data collection during the lock down period was really challenging for the students. The faculty supervisors played the role of mentors during the field work and research addressing their psychological and emotional issues.

Even if the classroom teaching, field work practice and research training were completed partially online and partially offline during the pandemic, the entire social work education programme appeared to be stressful to many a student. Social workers belong to the frontline workers who provide psychological and emotional support to their clients. There have been several studies regarding the psychological impact of the pandemic upon the general population. There are only a few studies regarding the psychological impact of the pandemic upon the service providers especially the social work fraternity. In this context, the researcher who is a faculty member of the Institute decided to conduct a study on the level of psychological wellbeing experienced by the post graduate students of social work. The perceived level of psychological wellbeing was measured by using Ryff scales of psychological wellbeing. This study presents some suggestions and conclusions that are relevant to the promotion of good health and wellbeing among the student social workers.

## **2. Review of Literature**

There are several studies reported across the world confirming the adverse impact of the pandemic upon the psychological wellbeing of the student social workers. During the pandemic, the stress experienced by the student social workers has increased. Their academic performance has been adversely affected by the pandemic. A study conducted in May 2020 covering 3,291 students enrolled in accredited social work programs in the United States about experiences during the

pandemic revealed that 61 percent of the students experienced less learning during online delivery compared to in-person instruction, 29 percent reported disruptions to their financial security and 35 percent experienced mental health concerns (Ethan et al. 2021).

A cross-sectional survey of U.S. social work students (Aynsley et al., 2021) explored into students' experiences of COVID 19-related stress, academic stress, and access to supports, changes in academic stress following the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic and factors that contributed to a change in academic stress following the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. The study confirmed an increase in students' academic stress following the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic and identified several factors contributing to levels of student stress, including program support and access to academic resources (Aynsley et al., 2021). A study conducted by Ashley and Rebecca (2021) on 632 Bachelor of Social Work and 890 Master of Social Work students during March and April 2020 described students' experiences with remote service delivery and abrupt terminations, and their insight into the role of social work in an unprecedented crisis. It highlighted the need for contingency and continuity planning, and the importance of emotionally supporting students (Ashley and Rebecca, 2021).

COVID 19 pandemic has undermined the mental health and the psychological wellbeing of the student social workers. A qualitative study (Cleofas, 2021) undertaken on five Filipino college students, revealed the feelings of uncertainty, worry about their future career prospects, anxiety and disappointment because of COVID 19 and its effects on their lives. Quarantine measures have impeded the plans to celebrate, socialize and travel with their peers and families (Cleofas, 2021, p. 558). The study undertaken by the researchers here in Maharashtra, India, has also confirmed the findings of the global level

studies on the mental health of the student social workers. Psychological wellbeing of the student social workers is adversely affected in India which calls for implementation of urgent measures on the part of social work educators and social work institutions to address the mental health issues of the student community.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB) was used to measure the various dimensions of PWB. According to Ryff (2006) autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance are the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing. Autonomy refers to ability for self-determination, independent decision making, resistance to social pressures, regulation of behaviour from within and evaluation of self by personal standards. Environmental mastery refers to competence in managing the environment, control on external activities, best use of surrounding opportunities and ability to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values. Personal growth refers to a feeling of continued development, growth, expansion, self-knowledge, effectiveness and improvement in self and behaviour over time, openness to new experiences and a sense of self-realization. Positive relations with others refer to warm, satisfying and trusting relationships with others, give and take of human relationships, concern about others' welfare, and capability of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy. Purpose in life refers to a sense of goals and directedness in life, meaning to present and past life, and aims and objectives for living. Self-acceptance refers to a positive attitude toward the self, acceptance of multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities and feeling positive about past life (Ryff, 2014).

Ryff scales of psychological wellbeing was circulated online among the student social workers along with the consent form for voluntary participation in August 2021. The study was undertaken through several online classroom settings. Each item of the psychological scale was explained to the students in the classroom. Before the online survey, the informed consent form which formed the first section of the online survey form was explained to the students.

In the informed consent form, the confidentiality of the information collected was guaranteed and the rights of the participants of the study with regard to their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research were ensured. They were also informed through the consent form that the information collected would be used for presentation in national and international conferences and publication in national and international journals. Out of the 104 students who were given orientation about the study, 50 students consented and filled in the online form properly. Their responses were collected through a google form and analysed with the help of statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Major findings of the study have been tabulated and analysed. Scoring for each dimension as well as overall psychological wellbeing was done. On the basis of the aggregate scoring, the respondents were divided into three groups with low, moderate and high level of psychological wellbeing.

After the online survey, the students were also given instruction about the self-scoring of the scale. PWB, being a self-reporting scale, could be scored by the participants themselves for improving their self-understanding. The overall findings of the study in tabular forms were shared with the students and they were informed about the counselling services available at the Institute through the counselling helpline.

Since the students were attending the classes from remote locations, they could avail the services of the counselling helpline run by the Institute.

#### **4. Major Findings of the Study**

Important findings of the study are presented in the tables. The demographic profile of the students (Table 1) revealed that majority of the students were men, aged 22, belonging to reserved categories of SC, ST/NT/VJNT and OBC (80 %), having the graduation in BA and BSW (62 %), hailing from rural or tribal areas of Maharashtra state, unmarried, belonging to the Hindu religion and from the specialisation of urban and rural community development (URCD). The Chi-square analysis has shown that none of these demographic characteristics made any significant impact upon their differences in the levels of psychological wellbeing.

The study has revealed that 46 percent of the student social workers have exhibited high level of overall psychological wellbeing. However, there is a good proportion of students who experience moderate or low level of psychological wellbeing (54%). Social workers, being mental health professionals, are expected to be psychologically strong enough to help others to maintain their mental health. The study has shown that about 54 percent of the student social workers are not able to experience high level of overall psychological wellbeing which is a matter of concern. There is need for more research in this area to explore into the actual reasons behind this finding. Social work educators and social work institutions may pay attention to this aspect. The type of social work education including the field practice and research training imparted during the pandemic should take into consideration the psychological wellbeing of the students. Some sort of soft skill training has to be incorporated in social



work training to promote psychological wellbeing of the social work students.

**Table 1.** Overall Psychological Wellbeing of the Students

Variable	Category	Psychological Wellbeing			Total (N=50)	Pearson Chi-Square Sig. (2-tailed)
		Low	Moderate	High		
Gender	Woman	2.0%	24.0%	20.0%	46.0%	.356
	Man	8.0%	20.0%	26.0%	54.0%	
Age Group	21	4.0%	10.0%	2.0%	16.0%	.338
	22	4.0%	20.0%	20.0%	44.0%	
	23	2.0%	6.0%	10.0%	18.0%	
	24 to 29		8.0%	14.0%	22.0%	
Category	SC	4.0%	18.0%	10.0%	32.0%	.431
	ST / NT / VJNT	2.0%	12.0%	10.0%	24.0%	
	OBC		10.0%	14.0%	24.0%	
	General	4.0%	4.0%	12.0%	20.0%	
	BSW	4.0%	16.0%	10.0%	30.0%	
Education	BA	2.0%	12.0%	18.0%	32.0%	.893
	BCom		2.0%	6.0%	8.0%	
	BSc	2.0%	8.0%	6.0%	16.0%	
	Post-Graduation	2.0%	6.0%	6.0%	14.0%	
Native / Residential Location	Rural or Tribal Area	4.0%	38.0%	24.0%	66.0%	.079
	Semi Urban	2.0%		12.0%	14.0%	
	Urban Area	2.0%	2.0%	8.0%	12.0%	
	Metropolitan Cities	2.0%	4.0%	2.0%	8.0%	
State	Maharashtra	10.0%	40.0%	40.0%	90.0%	.666
	Out of Maharashtra		4.0%	6.0%	10.0%	
Marital Status	Married		2.0%	2.0%	4.0%	.890
	Unmarried	10.0%	42.0%	44.0%	96.0%	
Religion	Hindu	8.0%	34.0%	30.0%	72.0%	.810
	Buddhist		4.0%	4.0%	8.0%	
	Christian	2.0%	6.0%	12.0%	20.0%	
Specialisation	URCD	4.0%	24.0%	8.0%	36.0%	.201
	FCW	4.0%	8.0%	12.0%	24.0%	
	HRD		4.0%	6.0%	10.0%	
	MPSW	2.0%	8.0%	20.0%	30.0%	
<b>Overall</b>		<b>10.0%</b>	<b>44.0%</b>	<b>46.0%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

The correlational analysis of various dimensions of psychological wellbeing with demographic characteristics of

the students (Table 2) showed that self-acceptance has moderate correlation ( $0.01 > p < 0.05$ ) with gender which indicates that gender difference is moderately significant with regard to the psychological wellbeing of self-acceptance. Psychological wellbeing in the aspects of autonomy and personal growth have highly significant correlations ( $p < 0.01$ ) with the age group and moderately significant correlation with overall psychological wellbeing. It implies that age differences have an impact upon the sense of autonomy and personal growth felt by the students. Moderately significant correlations have also been found between positive relations and the specialisation of the students, between overall psychological wellbeing and age group, and between overall psychological wellbeing and the specialisation.

**Table 2.** Correlational Analysis of Various Dimensions of Psychological Wellbeing with Demographic Characteristics

Pearson Correlation / Level of Significance	Autonomy	Environmental Mastery	Personal Growth	Positive Relations	Purpose in Life	Self-Acceptance	Psychological Wellbeing
Gender	-.049	.073	-.204	.134	-.058	-.289*	-.044
	.733	.615	.156	.352	.687	.042	.761
Age Group	.371**	.042	.367**	-.017	.104	.143	.325*
	.008	.769	.009	.905	.472	.321	.021
Category	-.176	.118	.110	.035	.195	.224	.170
	.222	.413	.449	.807	.174	.118	.239
Education	.053	.194	.106	-.042	-.055	.057	.014
	.717	.177	.466	.772	.707	.695	.924
Native / Residential Location	.054	.085	-.011	.003	-.115	-.099	-.005
	.711	.559	.940	.986	.426	.496	.973
State	.032	-.290	.089	.124	.218	.020	.122
	.828	.041	.538	.391	.129	.889	.399
Marital Status	-.116	-.118	.109	.228	.021	-.044	-.044
	.422	.413	.451	.111	.888	.764	.764
Religion	-.020	-.222	.054	.175	.196	-.032	.122
	.889	.121	.710	.224	.173	.827	.399
Specialisation	.016	.169	.026	.333*	.256	.071	.316*
	.913	.240	.859	.018	.073	.626	.025

\*Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed);

\*\*Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 7. Conclusion

COVID 19 pandemic has affected all the walks of life, especially the educational sector. The study conducted to explore the level of psychological wellbeing of students of social work education with special reference to post graduate training in social work revealed that the level of psychological wellbeing of students of social work profession is not up to the level, it is expected to be. Professional social workers belong to the frontline workers during any pandemic and their role and contribution to secure psychological wellbeing of the emotionally, economically and socially distressed people is significant. It is expected that the social workers maintain a high level of psychological wellbeing, so that, they would be able to help others to secure the same. Social work training must focus on strategies to secure high level of psychological wellbeing to all the student social workers.

Social work training has three dimensions – academic training, field-based social work practice training and research training. All these aspects of social work training are affected by the pandemic. This adverse impact is reflected in the level of psychological wellbeing revealed in this study. Suggestion to improve the level of psychological wellbeing is organisation of special soft skill training sessions in online as well as offline mode to be imparted to the student social workers during the social work training. Soft skill sessions can focus upon various dimensions of psychological wellbeing, such as, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance.

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